Achieving the LOOK & SOUND of LEADERSHIP

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EXECUTIVE COACHING TIPS

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Facilitating Open Dialogue ▶ 10/06/11

Resistance is the norm

Soraya leads a team of programmers who work at client sites for weeks at a time. When her vice-president asked for feedback from the clients, she had only a few anecdotes. He wanted hard data.

Soraya and her team decided to create focus groups. The goal would be to bring clients together and get them to talk openly about their experiences.

When all the major clients agreed to attend, she was delighted. Then her heart sank when she realized that no one on her team—including herself!—had a clue how to get people to talk openly with other people present, especially when there might be some negative feedback.

Clint's situation was similar but with a twist. He'd taken over a group of technical experts whose team had just been restructured. Over several months, many of them had come to him privately to express displeasure with this process or that procedure.

In an attempt to build the team's support for each other, he created a meeting dedicated to shared problem-solving. He set out ground rules and made it clear he wasn't interested in blame or fault-finding; he just wanted the team to work together to make things better.

The result? People sat through the meetings squirming in their seats and avoiding eye contact. No matter what he tried, all those problems he'd heard about in private suddenly vanished. No one would admit to ever having *had* a problem!

Easing the resistance

Both Soraya and Clint were facing the extremely difficult task of getting people to speak openly in a public setting. What they both wanted was to learn the art of facilitation.

The word "facilitate" means to ease. But there is no guaranteed way to ease human interactions; a million different factors can spin public dialogue off course.

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When I teach facilitation skills, there's a powerful paradox I introduce early on: "Every time you, as the facilitator, open your mouth, you change what happens next in the room. And every time you *don't* open your mouth, you change what happens next in the room."

My point is that facilitation is as much art as science. It requires large doses of awareness of others and an even larger dose of awareness of yourself.

What follows is a crash course in facilitation skills. What you'll see is one core concept and two specific behaviors to help develop your ability to foster open dialogue in public forums. (Of course, the concept and behaviors work in private, too!)

The Core Concept: Accept, don't evaluate

When trying to foster open dialogue, your goal is to encourage people to talk. To achieve that goal, you must be open to everything you hear. You can't evaluate people or their ideas, no matter how outrageous they seem to you.

If disapproval flashes across your face for even an instant, people will see it and feel judged—and no one wants to be judged. Expressing disapproval non-verbally or verbally ("That's a non-starter," or "We've already tried that and it didn't work," or simply, "Nope") stifles dialogue. Don't do it.

Similarly, if you are overly encouraging ("Oh, what a great idea!"), people sense you're evaluating them as a teacher would. When you encourage any one idea, you make it "right" and "good;" participants intuitively understand there must also be ideas that are "wrong" and "bad." That stifles dialogue.

Any evaluation—even positive evaluation—can stifle participation. To create open dialogue, be inviting but neutral.

One technique I use to appear inviting but neutral is to imagine I've never heard any of the comments before; everything I hear is brand new—even if it's not! I consciously choose to be curious and interested in these fresh ideas.

Another technique I use is to say "thanks" when people contribute. It acknowledges that they put themselves forward and that I value their contribution. But it doesn't evaluate the content of what they said.

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The core concept: don't evaluate your participants or anything they say. Project an aura that says all ideas are welcome and no idea is out of bounds.

Behavior #1: Ask open-ended questions
Asking open-ended questions when you want open dialogue is elementary, right? But when I give workshop participants the task of interviewing a partner using open-ended questions, they find it surprisingly difficult.

"Can you tell me more about that?" is an open-ended question. Open-ended questions ask for essay answers.

"Did you mean 'abc'?" is a close-ended question. Close-ended questions ask for yes/no or fill-in-the-blank answers.

Close-ended questions are the default style of inquiry for most of us. You may intellectually understand the importance of asking open-ended questions, but I challenge you to listen to yourself during one-on-one conversations. What's your ratio of closed- to open-ended questions? If you're like most people, open-ended questioning is not your natural style.

This skill was discussed in detail in the Executive Coaching Tip called Questions as Leadership. Mastering this behavior can transform what all the people in your life share with you, from your direct reports to your boss to your spouse and kids!

Behavior #2: Develop comfort with silence
I often see beginning facilitators ask open-ended questions. "What ideas or concerns do you have about this?" they'll ask. Then they'll wait about eight seconds before they start talking again.

What they don't see is that their inability to wait in silence undercut the opportunity they created.

When I ask you an open-ended question, for example, "What ideas or concerns do you have about this?" I'm inviting you to reflect. When you accept that invitation, you turn your attention inward. You begin sorting through your inner files. You might begin to form your thoughts immediately, but the language center of your brain that will put those thoughts into words doesn't come online until later. You need time before you're ready to speak.

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Standing silently in front of a group for twenty, thirty or forty seconds can feel excruciating. But if the group (or even half the group!) is actually thinking, it's an investment that pays off beyond anything you can predict. Endure the discomfort.

How will you know?
How can you tell if people are actually thinking? Look at them. People who are turning their attention inwards tend to lift their chins and look upward. Or they tilt their heads and squint a little. Their gaze is less focused. If you see that sort of behavior, wait.

If, on the other hand, people are fidgeting with their pens and staring at their hands, they're not engaged. Move on.

The point: allow the participants' engagement to dictate when to break the silence rather than responding to your personal discomfort with silence.

While these two behaviors and the one core concept are only a small introduction to the complex art of facilitation, it is where I focused my work with Soraya and Clint. Soraya easily adopted an inviting, non-judgmental attitude but was surprised at how difficult it was to stop asking close-ended questions. Clint, on the other hand, had real difficulty hiding his judgment of others. Waiting patiently in silence was not his strong suit either.

But, with practice, they both improved and began using the techniques in their staff meetings and even in one-on-one sessions. Because the skills made such a difference in what they were able to draw out of others, they found they'd pushed themselves much further down the road of *The Look & Sound of Leadership*™.

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